



Cultural Analysis

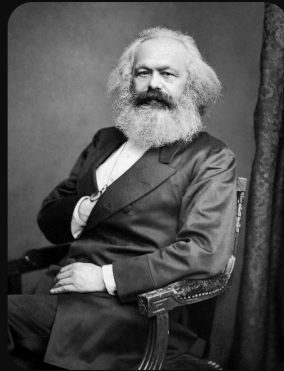
Connection to Key Anthropological Works



"Donald Winnicott in middle age," *The Winnicott Trust*.

Transitional Objects

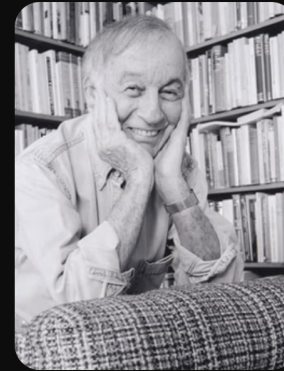
D.W. Winnicott



John Jabez Edwin Mayall, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Commodity Fetishism

Karl Marx



John Jabez Edwin Mayall, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Sweetness and Power

Sidney Mintz

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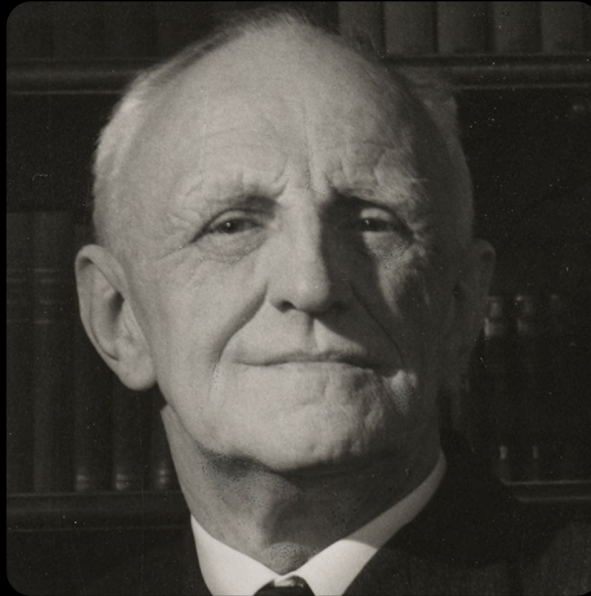
Made in Framer

D. W. Winnicott's Transitional Objects

Jack Rohloff

Another interesting connection lies between the writings of Winnicott, and his comments on transitional objects, and our research. In the Mount Zion - Female Band Union Cemetery where Reverend Joseph Cartwright lies to this day, there is a prevalent tradition of leaving objects on the graves. The grave of Nannie is one particular example that illuminates this connection: many different individuals leave toys on her grave. Interestingly, no one has any idea of who Nannie was or what her role was in Georgetown, yet she sparks a fascination that leads to people leaving objects on her grave. According to Lisa Fager, all of the graves once had collections of objects from their loved ones,

but when the graves were moved the objects were lost. Winnicott provides a framework for analyzing and understanding how these objects are used by the living to connect the physical world (Rev. Cartwright's grave) to their ideas and memories of him. The objects were used as a way to connect with him from beyond the grave. The analysis here can go much further, but for the sake of this brief connection, we just want to note how interesting and complex this connection could be.



"About Donald Winnicott," Top Banner, The Winnicott Trust.

Winnicott's perspective on transitional objects offers an interesting lens through which we can view our research on the Cartwright and Duckett families. Our research originally began with the gravestones of Gracie Duckett, Joseph Cartwright, and Lewis Sr. Cartwright, and thus these stones can be viewed as transitional objects that we used to connect our current reality to that of those who have passed. The grave stones thus fulfill Winnicott's transitional phenomena, bridging the gap between the living and the dead. Further, as we have progressed with our research, the letters, archives, and records of these families too function as transitional objects, allowing us to create some sort of relationship with people whose worlds otherwise remain wholly inaccessible and unknown.

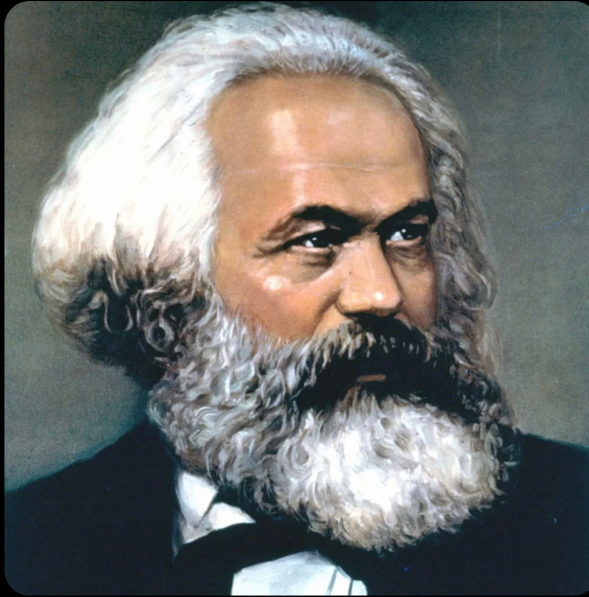
These materials operate much like Winnicott's transitional objects: they are concrete artifacts that aid us in imagining and interpreting the historical experiences of the Cartwrights and the Ducketts. In this sense, the process of archival research becomes a Winnicottian transitional space, as it bridges the gaps between self and other, me and not me, through material transitional objects, just as Winnicott explores in his transitional objects theory.

Karl Marx Commodity Fetishism

Rachel Yonteff

In his "Capital: a Critique of Political Economy" Karl Marx identifies the pattern of commodity fetishism that exists within a capitalistic society. He argues that in a capitalistic society, commodities appear to have intrinsic value within them, which causes the labor behind them to go ignored. This view of material objects perpetuates systems of exploitative labor practices, as people view objects themselves as having value, rather than the labor that created them. Thus, as he argues, a

capitalistic society ignores exploitative labor practices because society does not value the literal people who create these commodities that appear to be so valuable, which allows for exploitative labor practices, such as slavery, to be somewhat glossed over. For Marx, commodity fetishism is not simply the misrecognition of labor embedded in objects but rather the larger ideological process through which social relations between people become transformed into relations between things. In a slave economy, this distortion becomes even more extreme as the very people whose labor produces value are themselves turned into commodities.



"About Donald Winnicott," Top Banner, winnicott-trust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winnicott-trust-page-banner-about.jpg, The Winnicott Trust.

Marx's commentary on commodity fetishism can be clearly connected to our research, where the Duckett and Cartwright families were treated as literal commodities rather than actual people. This treatment of enslaved people is, when viewed from a Marxist view, founded in the idea that the value of commodities outweigh the value of the people that lay behind them, drawing a clear connection to Marx's ideas of commodity fetishism. This view of commodifying people is further extended to the commodification of the idea of freedom. As we have found through our research, Rev. Joseph Cartwright purchased his own freedom and that of his children, revealing how freedom itself became viewed as a literal commodity. This further reflects Marx critique of capitalistic systems that value monetary gains over humanity.

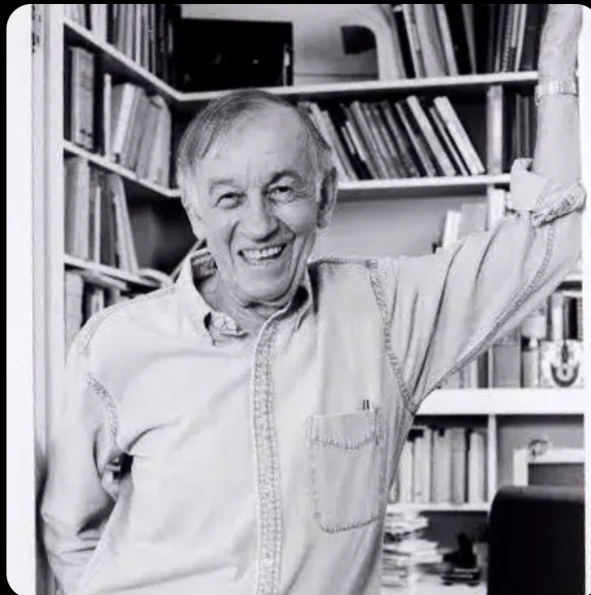
Marx's ideas on commodity fetishism provide an interesting lens through which we can view the physical headstones of the Cartwright and Duckett families. Throughout their lives, their labor and personhood were obscured by the fetishism that Marx describes: their value was derived not from themselves, but from the commodities they were forced to produce. Yet their physical headstones perform the opposite function. As literal objects proving the personhood of these families, the headstones become the building blocks of the process of de-commodification. The labor that produced these stones does not obscure the people beneath them, but instead the stones anchor and materialize their memory. In their solid, durable, and visible state, these headstones literally solidify the memory of the Cartwright and Duckett families, resisting the erasure that commodity fetishism once enabled. These markers force a recognition of the humanity of those who were previously objectified through their creation of a space where descendants, community, and even researchers can begin to reconstruct the personhood that capitalism and slavery sought to flatten. Our research, beginning with these headstones, proved this very concept, by demonstrating how these stones function as material commodities that reverse the fetish logic by revealing rather than obscuring the lives of the Cartwright and Duckett families. Thus, while Marx argues that commodities obscure the people and labor that lay behind them, these gravestones (and our

research) suggests that physical commodities can also do the opposite.

Sidney Mintz: Sweetness and Power

Rachel Yonteff

Sidney Mintz, in his book “Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History” explores how sugar’s meanings and uses have changed over time and how consumption is shaped by production. He argues that in order to understand sugar as a commodity, we must look deeper to its social structure—how consumer demand is shaped by production systems, colonialism, and capitalism. Further, he ultimately argues that commodities like sugar hide the violent systems, notably slavery, colonialism, and global capitalism, that produced it. This framework resonates deeply with our research, where we have tracked the material traces of the Cartwright and Duckett families. From manumission papers, to marriage and death records, to mortgages and newspaper clippings, we’ve traced seemingly bureaucratic objects that in reality crystalize massive systems of racialized labor extractions, just as Mintz does with sugar. Like sugar, these documents we’ve traced only truly make sense when considered with the wider structures of power and exploitation that produced them: plantation economies built upon the commodification of Black life. Mintz’ analysis thus illuminates how seemingly simple objects in reality carry the imprint of exploitative labor systems and the violence of slavery, while simultaneously showing how enslaved and formerly enslaved people navigated, resisted, and redefined these structures.



"Sidney Mintz." photograph by Sam Roberts, 30 December 2015.

Further, Mintz’ observations on sugar offer a fascinating lens through which we can consider the transformation of the Tidewater/D.C economy from the era of slavery to modern day. Just as Mintz notes, the changing meaning of sugar reveals how shifting production reorganizes social life, the post-emancipation Tidewater region saw a similar reconfiguration—as slavery was abolished it gave way to wage labor and new forms of racial governance that replaced the forced labor system. The end of slavery did not dissolve the exploitation that Mintz describes, but instead caused it to be rearticulated through systems like sharecropping, convict leasing, debt peonage, and the growth of the bureaucratic state that oversaw black mobility, property ownership, and labor.

The archival material we've used for this project show how Black families like the Cartwrights and Ducketts negotiated this shifting landscape of freedom through marriage, church networks, and emerging legal rights that allowed them to assert autonomy within a system designed to circumscribe it. Thus, Mintz' framework, outlines a continuity: the region's transformation from a slave based economy to a modern capitalist one did not eradicate the commodification of black life but instead transformed its mechanisms, embedding the same exploitative race based structures that governed the slave based economy into institutional framework that continues to shape the lived realities of Black communities in the D.C area to this day.